

MY FRIEND BILLIE RAWSON

The ADVENTURES OF A RETIRED SECRET SERVICE MAN

BY JOHN KENDRICK BANGS

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IN my efforts to portray the very unusual quality of my friend Billie Rawson's genius I should be false to him and to myself as well if I failed to point out one respect in which Rawson has differed from, and is therefore, I venture to say, because of his greater humanness, superior to all his rivals in the affections of the readers of the history of detection of the day. Sherlock Holmes, Dupin, Hawkshaw, Monsieur Lecoq, all the detectives of historical fiction, have invariably been successful in all their undertakings, large or small. None of them has ever been known to fail. With an almost clocklike regularity they have come, they have seen, they have deduced and they have conquered.

With Rawson, I rejoice to say, it is different, for Rawson, ay, even Rawson the perfect, has been known to fail. His best laid schemes have been known on occasions, very rare occasions, of course, but still humanly frequent, to come down with a crash.

The story of the Dictagrafters is one of these failures, and I record it with pleasure, not alone for the dramatic climax which ultimately sent Rawson's plans astray, but for the purpose of showing Rawson's human superiority over the rest of his contemporary heroes. Since I have it from Rawson himself, it may be regarded as a very true and accurate presentation of a portion of the secret history of the famous city of Grafton.

The state of affairs municipal at Grafton was suspiciously suggestive of the name of that thriving burg. The mayor, who had been elected upon the reform ticket, alone of all the members of the city council was generally looked upon as wholly untainted, but, as some of the taxpayers chose to put it, this was not due so much to his proclivities as a reformer as to the fact that, like most reformers, he was hardly practical enough to be useful to the malefactors of great enterprise who were reaching out to grab everything in the nature of a franchise within the range of human vision. The interlocking directorates of all the public service corporations of Grafton were made up of men of not only keenly prophetic vision, but of almost supernatural first sight as well in the matter of profitable adventures for the benefit of the Greater Grafton, of which the taxpayers nightly dreamed and daily boasted. They had control of the gas and electric companies through whose beneficent operations Grafton had become a center of light and living; and the several trolley lines that threaded the city streets, though presumably independent of each other, were in point of fact the secret property of two individuals who thoroughly understood each other and who, though outwardly quarrelling, and cutting each other's financial throats, were privately as firmly knit together by their mutual interests as ever were Damon and Pythias.

There was one fly, however, in theointment of beneficent monopoly at Grafton that irritated these worthies beyond expression. In one very populous quarter of the city was a thoroughfare through which up to this time no steel rails had been laid, and year after year, in spite of the best efforts and most insidious appeals of the promoters, the right to lay tracks therein had been denied by the ever-matchful city fathers. Packed mass meetings, personal appeals, every instrument of persuasion, open and secret, had failed to convince the honorable board of aldermen that public interest demanded the extension of the electric lines through Heights avenue; but now, since the new board had been elected on the reform wave, it had come to the ears of those back of the enterprise that some of its members were open to "argument." How much "argument" would be required was not definitely known, but there were certain channels of information that led the promoters to believe that \$50,000 suitably distributed where it would do the most good might turn the trick in their favor.

Fifty thousand dollars was a goodly sum, and it might take the road all of three months to get it back, but nevertheless the suggestion seemed to Col. Woglom to be worth considering if only for the advantage to be gained from turning it down. Unfortunately, however, it turned out that Brother Jimpson, of the combine, president of the Grafton National Bank, trustee of the orphan asylum, and pillar-in-chief of all spiritual movements in the community, was averse to committing State prison offenses, except by proxy, and when the intimation was made to him that some-

body, or perhaps several bodies, could be had at a figure as yet unnamed, the suggestion was received with an outburst of righteous wrath that was as inspiring as it was terrible to behold. His fist came down on the shining mahogany surface of his table in the president's office at the bank with a bang that caused the paying teller outside to jump with nervous anxiety lest some wanderer from the highway had happened in with the intention of "shooting up" the institution.

"I'll see the board of aldermen scragging on the bottom of the bottomless pit before I'll consent to the expenditure of a penny of graft," he roared. "And, what's more, Woglom, he added, 'if this thing is put through without my consent by the payment of money to the guardians of the public welfare, I'll expose the whole rotten proceeding if I have to start a newspaper of my own to do it.'"

"Far be it from me to suggest anything of the sort, my dear Jimpson," Col. Woglom had interposed in his gentlest manner. "So far our hands are clean, and whatever anybody else may propose to do I intend to keep mine so. Nevertheless, we must consider the public interest, and the way I look at it is this: For the public good, if we have any grafters in the board of aldermen, I think the fact should be ascertained, and if established communicated to the world through the most effective instruments of exposure available. Now I am the last man in the world, as you know, who would wish to corrupt a fellow-man, but I should be willing nevertheless to make almost any personal, or financial, sacrifice to bring a crooked public servant to justice. The crooked man in a position of power is a menace to our free institutions, a cancer on the body politic, and a festering sore in the public eye. He brings civilization itself into contempt, and I consider it an act of the highest patriotism and civic virtue to bring about his downfall."

"Then what is it you really propose to do?" demanded Jimpson, who, having freed himself of his pent-up righteousness and placed his principles upon record beyond the possibility of their being misunderstood, was quite ready to get down to business.

"My suggestion," said Woglom, "is that we skin this particular cat in another way—in a way that will secure the franchise for us and at the same time land the grafters in the pen."

"Both desirable," said Brother Jimpson laconically. "But just how? I'd like a bill of particulars."

"Well, your son-in-law, Harry Bobleigh, is district attorney, and wants to be mayor," said Woglom. "Now the easiest way for him to get to be mayor is through a series of graft exposures in which he is the moving spirit. I suggest, therefore, that you get him interested in the present situation. Give him to understand that we have had it intimated to us that we can buy what we want, and have him get hold of such a man, for instance, as William Rayson, of New York."

"You mean the secret service man who landed those Western hoodlums last year?" asked Jimpson.

"The very same," said Woglom.

"Ahem!" said Jimpson reflectively. "Yes—he's a very able man, Woglom, but—ah—aren't you afraid that under all the circumstances—ahem—it might be a rather dangerous proceeding for—ahem—for us to get mixed up with—ahem—a man like that? He's no fool, they tell me."

"We don't have to mix up with him," said Woglom. "We are merely providing the financial backing for your son-in-law in his campaign for reform. It's natural enough that you should back your son-in-law in his public work, and if ultimately your own financial interests are improved by it, why, that has nothing to do with—"

"That's what I don't see," said Jimpson. "Without crooked work on our side how are we going to land the franchise?"

"Simplicity itself," returned Woglom. "Bobleigh, as district attorney, can secure Rawson's aid legitimately in his campaign against graft, and my idea would be that a good way for them to proceed would be to have Rawson come here and start a rival company to ours—he might call it the Greater Grafton Public Service Corporation, for instance, and have it given out that he is backed by millions of New York capital seeking investment. The appearance of a rival on the field will add zest to the aldermanic thirst for the fleshpots of our sinking fund. Where two people want the same thing that same thing rises in value, and the city fathers, operating under the law of supply and demand, will begin flitting with us a little more vigorously, and we'll turn 'em down righteously and hard. That'll

be your part of the job, Jimpson. You can put more oily piety into a fake throwdown on behalf of your old favorite, public morality, than any man I ever knew; and then, just at that moment—what the highbrows in the Ladies' Browning Club call the psychological moment—Rawson's bogus 'Public Service Corporation' will step in and strew a little loose cash athwart the aldermanic vision. They'll fall for it, unless

son-in-law's hands as a special fund to enable him to fight graft in his beloved native town."

"I'll go you," said Jimpson.

THE DICTAGRAFTERS

Ten days later, Billie Rawson was retained by the district attorney of Grafton to go there, look the situation over, and see what could be done to ferret out the grafters and bring them to justice. "I knew before I left New York that

against granting the franchise to anybody, and in point of fact as matters now stood it was "up to" the mayor. The board was evenly divided, one-half refusing to consider any franchise at all and the other half waiting, somewhat impatiently, for "conviction" to dawn upon the horizon of their financial outlook.

Finally one bright morning in the spring of the year Rawson announced



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all the signs fail and give Rawson the franchise; he'll expose them in the Daily Evening Blast; Bobleigh will have them indicted, leaving us to walk off with the real plum. We'll buy out the Greater Grafton Public Service Corporation, franchise and all, for a song."

"Very ingenious, Woglom, very ingenious," grinned Brother Jimpson. "I don't know—ahem—I guess maybe—well, yes—I'll go in on the venture. But I want it distinctly understood that what I pay out of my pocket for this business is not for the sake of that franchise, but for the public good, and with the desire of aiding my son-in-law in his efforts to make political life in Grafton perfectly clean and honest. Down with the grafters at any cost, say I."

"We'll put it in writing if you wish," said Woglom wearily. "This is to certify that Cyrus Jimpson, party of the first part, has entered upon this reform crusade with no ulterior purposes of a corrupt nature whatsoever, but, on the contrary, is actuated solely by a desire—"

"That'll do, Woglom," said Jimpson. "I merely want to keep myself straight on the record. With a man of Rawson's reputation for subtle character reading around, I'm not going to overlook any opportunity to make my reasons for going into this thing absolutely clear. How much is the thing going to cost?"

"Oh, \$25,000 will do for a starter, I imagine," said the colonel. "I'll take half if you will, and all that remains for you to do is to put this amount in your

there were some crooks up there anywhere," he laughed, when telling me about it later. "The district attorney himself stood up so abominably straight that I wasn't altogether sure when I started in that he wasn't a trifle bow-legged morally himself."

Two months later, Grafton was in a state of tumultuous excitement. There was a new Richmond in the field of public service. The Greater Grafton Public Service Corporation had come in at the eleventh hour and was giving the old "combine" a hard run for its money, having actually had the temerity to work up a considerable public sentiment in its favor against the pretensions of the Woglom-Jimpson interests to the corporate as well as the physical ownership of Heights avenue. Rumor was rife, playing battledore and shuttlecock with several honored reputations in aldermanic circles, and the ladies of that particular official set were not at all proud of the things that were being whispered on all sides relative to the disinterestedness of their husbands. Nothing, however, was definitely known as yet about anybody, or his relation to the paramount question of the hour. All that anybody knew was that a quiet little man representing a new company with unquestioned backing was very actively engaged in trying to down the capitalistic combine that had hitherto held Grafton in its grip, and among the "better classes" there was not a little rejoicing that the Moloch of local finance had at last met its match. Still, a respectable number of aldermen held out

to the district attorney that he thought things were about ready for a killing. "The mayor has begun to nibble at last," he said, "and this morning he really swallowed the bait, hook, line and sinker. I think he'd have found room for the rod and the reel as well if I had been willing to let go. Ten thousand in cash will land him. Is it available? We shan't need it more than a week."

"Sure," said Bobleigh. "My father-in-law will let me have it in a minute."

"Have you any influence with the management of the Grafton House?" asked Rawson.

"Yes," said the district attorney. "Mr. Jimpson owns it."

"Bully," said Rawson. "That being the case, we ought not to have any trouble about installing a dictaphone in one of the rooms, so that whatever goes on in that room may be overheard in another far enough away to avert suspicion of eavesdroppers."

"I see," said the district attorney. "I'll arrange it all in a jiffy."

"You see," Rawson went on "this whole business has got to be witnessed, as it were, and the mayor would certainly shy off if there were a third party present when I handed him over his honorarium. My plan is to put a dictaphone in a room on the first floor of the Grafton House, connected with a chamber on the third floor, where you and your backers, Col. Woglom and Mr. Jimpson, with a couple of stenographers to take down what they overhear, can sit and listen to the whole proceeding. I'll speak loud enough for you to hear,

me, and as for the mayor I'll put him in a chair right over the machine, so's you can almost hear him breathe. Do you get me?"

"You're a wonder, Rawson!" cried the district attorney enthusiastically. "But—er—have you arranged with the mayor to come? He might object to being seen going into your room."

"Oh, I've fixed that up all right," laughed Rawson. "I shan't be there as myself or as president of the Greater Grafton Public Service Corporation. I am to appear in an entirely new guise—as the Rev. Harrington B. Jones, general secretary of the Progressive Missionary League of Hawaii, come to talk over Sunday school organization with the superintendent of the Hill Church Sunday School. It's a rather slick arrangement and quite necessary, for I want to tell you, and those back of you in this investigation, that your mayor is about as polished a gem in the grafting line as I have ever encountered in or out of reform circles. Subtle is his middle name, and it is a wonder to me your people haven't tried to use him instead of jugging him. He'd make an ideal governor for a lot of fellows that know just what they want."

"You have an entire misconception of the character of our people here, Mr. Rawson," said the district attorney coldly. "My father-in-law's motives in this case are wholly disinterested. Quite as much so as my own."

"Oh, all right," said Rawson. "All right, Mr. Bobleigh. Nevertheless, if this thing falls through you might bear my suggestion in mind. Meanwhile get me the \$10,000 in nice, fresh hundred-dollar bills, please, and get Mr. Jimpson to fix matters up with the manager of the Grafton House so that I can have my dictagraph installed."

"I'll have our own electrician attend to it for you at once," said the district attorney.

"No," said Rawson. "Don't bother. I prefer to use my own electricians."

To say that those gathered in Room 335 on the third floor of the Grafton House were in a state of fluttering excitement bordering upon nervous prostration on the evening of May 19, the date set for the final landing of his honor the mayor, is to put it with an almost ethereal mildness. Even Woglom, the imperturbably cool past master in the devious ways of promotion, was all a-quiver, and the district attorney, whose own eye had been fixed for years on the mayoralty, could almost feel the weight of the yearned-for mantle resting upon his shoulders, his chief rival, the present incumbent, having fallen by the wayside.

Jimpson and the two stenographers alone remained outwardly cool, although inwardly they were consumed by the fires of an excited anticipation comparable only to that of a lot of children face to face with a new and mysterious toy. A large and expensive megaphone stood on the center table connected with the dictaphone in Room 29, first floor front below, and yawned silently upon the gathering. Across the square the town clock boomed out the hour of 8, and then even whispered conversation ceased, for this was the hour set for the supreme act of the drama of landing the mayor by the astute Rawson.

Suddenly, in a tense moment, the megaphone reported the opening of a door in Room 29, followed by sounds suggestive of the dropping of a suit-case to the floor. Woglom's eye flashed as his finger was lifted to his lips, enjoining all to stop, look and listen, and the first words came over in the unmistakable tones of a bellboy.

"Ice water, sir?"

"No, thank you," said a deep and most unfamiliar barytone voice. "Is supper still on?"

"Yes, sir," said the boy. "Dinner's open till 8:30."

"Thank you," said the barytone, and then the slamming of the door was heard as the boy departed.

"Guess we've got 'em cinched this time," said the district attorney in a stage whisper. "The machine's working like a dream."

"Sh!" hissed Woglom, holding up a warning finger, for the megaphone had begun to speak again.

"At last!" came the deep barytone voice, in which there seemed to be concentrated all the honeyed sweetness of a million years of bee life.

This was followed by a long-drawn out sibilance, half suggestive of a man trying to start a reluctant horse, and then a merry little feminine laugh.

"Didn't Aunt Maria look funny?" said a giggling voice.

The district attorney scratched his head in a puzzled sort of way and stared blankly at the machine.

"Did she?" said the barytone, sweetly. "I didn't see her—fact is, sweet-

heart, I couldn't see anything but you—"

"You dear thing!" cooed the feminine voice.

"Everywhere I looked it was you, you, you—" the barytone quivered on. "What the devil is the meaning of all this drivel?" muttered Woglom, with an uneasy glance at Jimpson, who was glowering at the two stenographers, while the district attorney, with eyes popping out of his head, gazed into the depths of the frivolous megaphone.

"Do you really love me, Henry?" said the soft feminine voice again. "Wee-an-twooly-no-foolin'-cross-your-heart-forebber-an'-forebber-amen?"

"Oo can bet oo itty ifey I does!" returned the manly barytone.

"Um lubbs um Hawwiboy, too!" came the soft feminine voice, and then a repetition of the sibilance.

The district attorney was at the door by this time.

"There's been some mistake," he stammered. "I'm going downstairs to find out what's the matter."

"The wires must have got crossed," said Woglom.

"Oh, just look at that rice!" cried the giggling voice.

"Yes," laughed the barytone. "Old Jinks let me have it by the hand—we've got almost enough to start house-keeping on, haven't we, you dear, sweet, belovedest—"

"Now, Henry! You've mused my hair all up—I just can't go down into the dining-room looking this way," protested the feminine voice. "And, Henry—"

"Yes, Yummy?" said Henry.

"Good Lord!" muttered Jimpson. "Isn't there any way to turn this thing off?"

"Pretty drippy, isn't it?" ejaculated Woglom, with a wry face.

"You mustn't yook at oor itty yiefy zat way when we det down into de dining-yoom. Zay'll all know we's a bwide an'— the feminine voice was lingering sweetly on the syllables, when the district attorney burst into the room, his face red with wrath.

"That blistering jackass of a room clerk—" he blurted out.

"Yes? What?" cried Woglom.

"Has pied the whole business!" groaned the district attorney. "He's put a bride and groom in No. 29!"

"Gug-good Lord!" stammered Woglom. "And whuh-what's become of Rawson and the mayor?"

"They're sitting down in the office discussing Sunday school organization in the Fiji Islands," said the district attorney.

"Come away from there," said Jimpson, rising suddenly and seizing the stenographers by the coat-tails and dragging them away from the megaphone. "We shan't need you gentlemen again this evening, and here's an extra twenty apiece for you. We—er—we don't care to have this matter go any farther."

And as the grinning stenographers withdrew, Jimpson pulled a jackknife out of his pocket and cut the wires.

"There are some communications," said he, "that must be regarded as privileged."

"Well, Mr. Rawson," said the district attorney, later, viewing Rawson's vociferous amusement over the climax of his plans with great displeasure. "I'm glad you find something in this business to laugh at. You appear to be proud of your work."

"Oh, no," said Rawson, "not particularly—only, you see, I can't feel as badly about it as you do because I've known from the beginning I was sure to fail."

"Sure to fail?" echoed the district attorney. "What do you mean by that, sir?"

"Why," said Rawson, "my mission here was to bring the grafters to justice, but under all the circumstances, in the very nature of our arrangement, I couldn't do it."

"Do you mean to say you couldn't have landed the mayor?" demanded the district attorney.

"No—I'd have landed him all right, Mr. Bobleigh," said Rawson, "but he really wasn't the big fish in this particularly mucky puddle. You set me after the wrong man. The most dangerous offender you've got here is that insidiously subtle interlocking directorate that under the guise of backing you and working for a cleaner Grafton is using you as a cat's paw for dragging its own chestnuts out of the fire. I guess it's better for you all the way it has turned out, for after I had landed the mayor I was going after—"

"Woglom and Jimpson?" cried the district attorney.

"Ultimately, yes," said Rawson, "but before that—"

"The aldermen?" asked the district attorney.

"No," said Rawson. "You!"